



Role of philosophy in the time of crisis (with special reference to Covid pandemic)

Muzaffar Abass Wazir¹

Abstract:

This article attempts to give an opinion on why is it that the question of “role” is being asked particularly of philosophy as this precedes the question of role of philosophy in crisis. And in doing so, we will come across three factors although no exhaustively to be among the salient factors for the question of role with respect to philosophy. Despite those factors being the case philosophy in itself plays an essential role and especially in crisis no matter in what context you put philosophy into, it always thrives in such situation of chaos. And the pandemic of Covid is no less than a chaos where I will show how at the deepest level of the issues in the pandemic are more serious philosophical problems to deal. Thus, Philosophy does act in a very subtle and at the deepest level that its role is undisputed in crisis especially.

Keywords: First person perspective, metaphysics, contextualized, coherentism, personhood

¹ M.Phil. Scholar, J.N.U.
amuzaffarwazir139@gmail.com

Introduction:

Prior to the effort of giving an opinion on the above topic whose semantic and syntactic structure in its bare form is that of a subordinate clause, which could be interpreted both to form an interrogative remark as well as an assertion. But since one has to make the above topic as its theme it is more appropriate to consider that in the interrogative form i.e. “what is the role of philosophy in the time of crisis (with special reference to Covid pandemic)?” But before that we must first ask ourselves one more basic question in general and that is, why is it the case that such a question of “role” is only asked with respect to the discipline of philosophy generally. And then we will deal with the main theme of the topic in the context mentioned above. It is important to have clarity on the question of “role” being asked generally in philosophy because an answer to this question might reveal why it is that we have such themes for philosophers to write on and that too happens without raising an eyebrow. For that we must need to know the term “role”, what does it mean, when people use it and in what context. Both its lexical and contextual meaning of the term “role” is with respect to its functioning, so to ask one’s role is to ask what it/one does. And this contextual as well as lexical meaning is true for every discipline and

questions of such kind are never generally asked of other disciplines other than philosophy.

Role of philosophy

The reason that role oriented question is never asked (I think so) of other disciplines be it physics, biology, mathematics and even literature or any other interdisciplinary one is because of their respective realm being clearly specified and very well demarcated. And no problems in one discipline is capable of shaking the foundations of the other disciplines, even though they could amend or clarify their work citing works of other disciplines (especially in interdisciplinary courses) in a way that their work does not transcend their respective realm. Despite this being the case a third person (who is not acquainted with the discipline) could still ask a role oriented question due to its ignorance but in the discipline of philosophy, even the first person (philosopher) him/herself asks the role oriented question despite being so acquainted with philosophy. And also experts in other disciplines inquire along these lines with the connotation of existential one and such is the issue at hand that we need to address and elucidate to proceed further in this article. The very fact that philosophers and students of philosophy are asked to write an essay on the role of philosophy in the time of crisis in the context of the Covid pandemic

substantiates the point of asking role oriented questions from first person perspective (that is philosophers).

Now let us try to understand the salient factors that are responsible for such an inquiry from both experts in other disciplines or from the first person perspective itself. There seem to be three important factors in determining, even for a philosopher to ask the role question. The three mentioned factors are not meant to suggest that they exhaust such factors, first, unavailability of a definition of philosophy. The question of the role itself has to do with the definition of philosophy or to ask what it is that philosophy does is also to ask what the definition of philosophy is to a certain extent. And any philosophers would agree that it is quite to a certain extent impossible to confine the definition of philosophy although we could agree on certain characteristics like philosophy being a Meta account, a foundational one, etc. but these characteristics are far from the conception of a definition. And as a result, there is always in the non-philosophical world a misconception of baptizing an act or term or entity as either philosophical or philosophizing in a demeaning sense. Second, the underlying potential in its subfield of becoming an independent discipline or specialized field in itself, when we look at the history of philosophy especially in western this tendency of an

offshoot of philosophy becoming an independent or specialized field is quite evident. The topics concerned to Thales, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Descartes, Hume, etc were related to making sense of their surrounding by trying to know the origin of the world, the fundamental particles, the conception of God, the process of knowing something, mathematics etc. And now when today we look at these questions or disciplines or terms they all in themselves are looked at either by different disciplines or are in themselves different disciplines in itself. And they no longer form any sort of relation to philosophy (historically one could trace) as such although philosophy does attach its relation to any discipline it wants because of its Meta characterization. And such tendency allows the discipline of philosophy itself to be looked at as once a means to achieve something and not relevant now. Even today when we look at reality and bring forth the metaphysics of Leibnitz with respect to reality and the conception of fundamental particles, these are no longer considered substantial enough to be considered although not conclusively refuted either. And it is rather looked as if it is a romantic intellectual output of someone endeavouring to make sense of reality which now is being catered by physics in a very detailed and independent way. Third, both third and second are kind

of linked together, the reducibility of any philosophical inquiry into a kind which is catered by a non-philosophical discipline. Consider the inquiry with respect to how the mind works today although this field is being explored at a much larger level these days but within it so many inquiries are catered by neuroscience, psychology as well as cognitive science. And in the same respect metaphysical inquiries related to fundamental particles are now being investigated by physics, inquiry regarding human beings is also being reduced to an inquiry by biology although not all of them. But such trends are allowing philosophers to speculate or even to ask whether any inquiry of philosophy would remain as philosophical at all or could it again be reduced to inquiries catered by other non-philosophical disciplines. This third aspect is also highlighted by experts in other fields of discipline. Based on these three factors, both a philosopher and an expert in other disciplines might wonder whether philosophy is just a romantic intellectual rigor or an activity that one is unconsciously addicted to and to keep the rigor alive philosophers problematize it in a way that no other disciplines are able to handle such problems. Well these are although speculations from philosophers' sides too and allegation from other experts, that is allowing both philosophers and non-

philosophers to ask the question related to role with respect to philosophy.

Role of philosophy re-established and the notion of crisis

Despite the above factors being the case, there is still a significant role of philosophy that can be asserted and in times of crises, the need is further exacerbated. Now to get hold of this aforementioned sentence one needs to know what does it mean by the term "crises" and when do we consider a situation as a "crisis". Situations that could be termed as a crisis could be both as concrete as hunger, malnutrition, falling economy, etc as well as, as abstract as that of a mathematical one. So that means we need an interpretation of the notion of the crisis itself in a context of philosophy or how the crisis itself could be philosophized and this will allow us to get back our lost confidence due to the above section sectionized as "the role of philosophy".

Crisis here is equivalent to problems, problems in philosophy, and problems in mundane lives, problems in every field at a functional level and also in any other disciplines. Whatever be the problem or crisis which philosophy is capable of handling due to its dynamicity in a different way. Take for instance the case of social groups that sociologists, political theorists or scientists talk about without an in-depth understanding of what a social group itself is or how it is formed. And this question of

social group is looked at by philosophers and the discipline if one would classify it as is called "Social Ontology ". This is an instance of dynamicity of philosophy. Due to philosophy's non confinement in terms of a definition (either lacking one or don't have one), its dynamicity allows itself to be rejuvenated in whatever way it wants to be, be it in the form of a meta account, foundational one or an auxiliary one etc. It nowhere leaves anything unanalyzed if it wanted so and such is its potency. And in terms of crises it allows the kind of analysis that no other discipline is capable of, be it an insight or a novel approach in any sphere of life. It could deal with an in depth potency to analyze a concept as superficial/trivial as a customary greeting or as complex as quantum mechanics or mind. The role of philosophy personally I would say is incommensurable because of its pervasiveness in other discipline and the amount of impact it had in changing the views of other discipline as well as its own purely philosophical problems like problems in metaphysics with respect to ontology, the issues of a possible world in logic, the objectivity of moral principles in ethics and so on. No other discipline has this much of dynamicity in terms of both its pervasive nature as well as its own significance of philosophical problems. So it could be said that philosophy does thrive in crisis as one of my professors used to say

that "philosophy always thrives in strife" in whatever context you would like to put it. The notion of crisis in itself is very general and as mentioned at the outset of this paragraph it varies from concrete to abstract so any role in terms of crisis must first contextualize the crisis itself to give an account of the role in that particular crisis. And this allows us to get to the issue of the crisis contextualized in the Covid pandemic where we have to identify the role of philosophy as such.

Role of philosophy in the crisis of Covid pandemic

The Covid pandemic unveiled to us that we have come so far and yet we are so behind in every aspect be it life itself, science, society, polity etc. It was among those crises for whom the question of where do we locate the crisis of this pandemic is inappropriate. But rather the question should have been where the crisis of pandemic cannot be found, and the answer is more likely to be nowhere and that is how pervasive it has been in its influence for more than a year. Now what is there for philosophy to offer in such conditions where it seems the pandemic itself has rendered many disciplines to a certain extent for the time being practically irrelevant? To look at the role of philosophy in the pandemic crisis one must give an account of the crisis that is prevalent in the pandemic despite being the fact that it has

left every aspect in chaos under its influence. So let us look at a few crises that are left unchecked by many and yet are having the most underlying and overarching influence on the whole human population and which on analyzing seem to have philosophical problems at its core or associated with it. But before that one must keep in mind that in the Indian context philosophy is about how to live a life so there the very notion of philosophy having any role is inappropriate because of the very intrinsic nature in which they let their philosophy to determine their way of living, be it the orthodox or unorthodox school of thoughts.

Let us first consider the issue of different theories/alleged theories purported with respect to certain events regarding Covid and with respect to Covid itself especially in India that had no relation with truth in a colloquial sense. Not only during pandemic but generally the issue of fake news/theories is of huge concern and especially such news/theories exacerbate the crisis undermining the efforts to curb the spread of pandemic. And it is this issue that I will cater to which I believe that at the very root of such an issue is a problem purely philosophical in nature. The issue with fake news/theories is that a large section of the population sometimes believes in it which has repercussions of far greater significance than is acknowledged.

Now to handle this issue one must ask oneself why is it that people believe in such fake news/theories and on analyzing in depth one would realize that the issue is purely epistemological where the general question that incorporates the above mentioned question is, when is it justified for one to hold onto a belief? and this is precisely the issue of believing fake news/theories because the other set of beliefs that a person holds seem to be in coherence with the fake news/theories as a result one believes that to be the case and that brings us to the problems or issues related to coherentism in epistemology which says that one is justified in holding a particular belief if it coheres with the rest of the set of beliefs. And to counter such fake news we have a fact-checker in place either freelancer or part of state machinery which looks at the correspondence of the alleged fake news/theories with the facts and this would make one understand that the issue at the very core is a confrontation between foundationalism and coherentism. Where the very possibility of believing in fake news/theories is stipulated and felicitated by the principles of coherentism and foundationalism acts as an anti thesis to such approach. And one may not need to go beyond this in asserting how our beliefs are responsible for our actions and so in a crisis like that of a pandemic one must acknowledge the issue of alleged theories

as a significant deterrence to any effort of curbing the pandemic.

Another issue at the core of the pandemic which is of huge importance is the very issue in biology or medical science and that is the probabilistic and statistical nature of medical science. It is general information in the public domain that the nature of treating Covid patients and the drugs given to them have changed over the period of time and more and more changes are being considered based on the efficacy of the treatment. Here this variation in treatment is very peculiar to biology or medical science and at its core is a simple philosophical problem to consider and that is the absence of universal laws in biology or medical science which otherwise allows science to be conclusive to a large extent despite the syntactic form of such laws having contingent statement characteristics. And these issues are considered not by biologists or medical scientists but by philosophers who deal with philosophy of biology or philosophy of science. And their main concern is always to know how it is that biology being incapable of having laws is yet alleged to have an explanation and where would one determine and demarcate the correlation from causation, the coincidence from causation etc. And the pandemic has again reinforced these questions to be prioritized for the philosophers working in the realm of

biology and these are issues by no means small in such a crisis.

Although there are issues within the crisis of pandemic where philosophy is deeply ingrained but due to the succinctness of this article I will consider one more issue as a concluding remark for this article and that is the issue of subjecthood or personhood. The pandemic has unfortunately taken lives in great numbers and those who succumbed to Covid were registered as a number in the records of government data as if their whole personhood or subjecthood was squeezed and confined to a mere abstract number in a record book. The number in the data could not incorporate the kind of person that human being was and the emotional toll his/her family faced when death devoured him/her. As a result, numbers were being recorded incessantly and insensitivity was percolating in the society as if we do not participate in the personhood and subjecthood of each and every human being due to our commonness of being human. Such issues are very philosophical in nature to deal with and of great importance to allow individuals to understand that the personhood and subjecthood is not confined to the body of someone who died but rather it is a shared one with no boundaries. And we must acknowledge it to have a society that is more empathetic than sympathetic and thus more sensitive to each other.

So one could say philosophy despite having no confined space is very pervasive and as a result have identity issues which also allows it to be dynamic to play a central role in transcending the limited boundaries of other disciplines, to look at the underlying issues. Thus, in that sense philosophy's role is and shall always be of great importance no matter if it is the time of ancients or the time of posterity. And even if philosophy is undermined by the onset of different disciplines it rises like a phoenix to assert its importance and novelty in its characteristic that no other discipline is capable of manifesting.

